

Congressional Testimony
by
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Mr. Chairman, Congressman Skelton, distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. From moment one, this Committee has been strongly supportive of the men and women in uniform, and I want to commend you for that – and thank you for the support that so many of you gave to me during my time in the military. As a former soldier, I can't stress enough how important these deliberations are to our armed forces and military families stationed around the world – and to the thousands of veterans I've met with over the past two years. I have also heard from thousands of people over the internet who wish to express their gratitude for your efforts and concerns about the situation in Iraq. On their behalf and on behalf of my own family, I thank you.

It is a privilege to appear today to present my thoughts on Iraq and our armed forces, to offer a brief retrospective on the mission there, to sketch out a successful way ahead, and to discuss the implications for the U.S. armed forces.

In September 2002, you invited me to testify about the looming crisis in Iraq. At the time, based on the information provided by the U.S. intelligence community, we all believed that Iraq possessed some chemical and biological weapons, and had an ongoing effort to gain nuclear weapons. It made sense at the time to go to the United Nations and get strong diplomatic reinforcement to end Saddam's weapons programs.

But the critical issue then was how to end Saddam's weapons program without detracting from our focus on Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network, and our efforts to deal with other immediate, mid- and long-term security problems. As you may recall, I counseled at the time that we needed a Congressional Resolution – not at that point

authorizing the use of force – but rather expressing the intent to use force if all other measures were to fail. I testified that we should then use this Congressional Resolution to press for UN action, that we should work patiently to forge world-wide legitimacy, and that force should be used only as a last resort, after all diplomatic means had been exhausted -- and then only after we had fully prepared to handle the post-conflict process in Iraq.

After a Congressional Resolution and an aborted U.N. inspection effort, the U.S. invaded Iraq. We did not use the U.N. process effectively to enhance our legitimacy or build our coalition. The Administration did not heed the warnings of General Shinseki and others who warned of the force strength necessary to win the war *and* win the peace. In short, the Administration did not give our military adequate planning or sufficient resources to handle the post-conflict situation in Iraq. These errors were compounded by weak strategic decisions, including dissolving the Iraqi army and outlawing Baathist participation in new governmental structures. The prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib has provided our enemies with a propaganda bonanza resulting in a recruiting windfall in Iraq and throughout the Arab world.

More fundamentally, with its armed occupation of Iraq, the Administration lost focus, and was substantially distracted from worldwide efforts against Al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network are still at large, terrorist incidents have continued to take innocent life, and U.S. military actions in Iraq have provided a magnet for recruiting and training large numbers of extremist youth in continuing warfare. If Iraq is today the center of the war against terrorism, as some in the Administration have contended, it is not because the terrorists were there originally, but because they have been recruited there to the fight against us. Our military action in Iraq is more a catalyst for terrorists than a cure. Whatever results may ultimately come from removing Saddam Hussein from power, ending the terrorist threat against the United States of America is not likely to be one of them.

Of great concern today and, frankly, in the years ahead is that the focus on Iraq has deprived the Administration of the time, diplomatic support, and military resources to act effectively against other, more dangerous sources of WMD proliferation. The “red line” established by the Clinton Administration against North Korea’s reprocessing of spent uranium fuel to make plutonium has now been breached. North Korea has announced that they have reprocessed and presumably now have the fissile materials to make at least a half dozen additional nuclear weapons. Furthermore, this Administration has refused to participate in the discussions aimed at persuading Iran to permanently renounce its uranium enrichment capabilities.

From the outset, the military mission in Iraq has been complicated by factors other than making the best decisions for success. Operations to destabilize Iraq were apparently viewed as the start of a broader campaign to destabilize or overthrow a number of governments in the Middle East, including Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Libya, and Sudan. The start of the campaign was rushed, for reasons that have never been made clear by the Administration. And once U.S. forces were inside Iraq, U.S. diplomacy failed to take measures to undercut regional resistance from countries such as Syria and Iran.

If we are to succeed in Iraq, we must move along three tracks; first, improve security and at the same time reduce the exposure and commitment of the U.S. forces; second, strengthen our ability to facilitate Iraqi political development; third, we must reduce regional resistance to the emergence of a democratic Iraq.

On the first track, the U.S. military must shift away from the battlefields and move into more of a reserve role, relying on a cadre of U.S. advisors to strengthen the newly-minted Iraqi forces. This will entail risks, as U.S. forces turn over combat responsibilities, so it must be paced to improved Iraqi capabilities and the development of an advisory structure.

On the second track, our Embassy obviously has to play a behind-the-scenes role. Without usurping Iraqi responsibilities, we should be able to do more to gain local

political information, shape alternatives and facilitate the emergence of democratic governance inside Iraq

On the third track, we should to be talking to all of Iraq's neighbors, including Syria and Iran in a regional framework. Delaying this until we can change the governments in Damascus and Tehran, which seems to be the current policy, puts increasing pressure on our troops and raises the risks inside Iraq.

The U.S. armed forces are caught up in an over-extended ground campaign that is rapidly using up our ground combat strength. In equipment terms, each year in Iraq puts about five years of normal wear-and-tear on the equipment. The wheeled and tracked fleets from the first combat rotation into Iraq have not yet been fully repaired and restored. Reserve component units are leaving much of their equipment behind in Iraq for follow-on units, thereby crippling their recovery and retraining at home

Even more importantly, the human costs to the all-volunteer Army, especially, have been staggering. The Army currently has 17 brigades deployed in Iraq, from an active force of 33 brigades, which should grow to 44 brigades as the result of internal Army restructuring. Most reserve component brigades have already been called up and deployed. The result is that active duty soldiers can expect to be deployed every other year to Iraq for a year long combat tour, unless either the size of the American commitment to Iraq is reduced or the size of the active force is significantly increased.

And even maintaining the force at its current size is likely to be challenging. While the active force is meeting its retention objectives, recruiting for the Army and Marine Corps is lagging behind both for the active and the reserve component. Ultimately, if the current combat levels in Iraq continue, this recruiting gap is unlikely to be closed by more financial incentives. Most married soldiers just can't contemplate indefinitely deploying for a year, every other year, away from their families.

Even worse is the treatment that the United States is meting out to its returning reservists, Guardsmen, and other veterans. Over the past three years there has been a substantial erosion of veterans benefits – hospitals have closed or reduced treatments, usage fees have risen, returning reservists and Guardsmen have lost jobs, had their homes foreclosed on, credit scores ruined, suffered family tragedies, and significant stresses. The adjustment mechanisms to receive home our soldiers and then to sustain them and care for them as a grateful nation should are simply inadequately developed and funded. We owe our veterans – and we owe their families as a pragmatic matter, if we don't do more, we'll never be able to raise the forces we need to sustain our commitments.

If we are to sustain the all-volunteer force, and restore our defenses, we will need to augment the size of the active force substantially, fully fund our materiel requirements, enhance the benefits and support for our reserve force, and as both a pragmatic and moral imperative, fully fund the VA and improve our support structure for our veterans.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you again for your support of our troops. I will be pleased to take your questions.